LISTEN TO YOUR OWN VOICES
I Samuel 3:1-10
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

One Sunday every summer, during the years I was a Divinity School student, I was invited to preach from the pulpit of my home church in Altoona, Pennsylvania. Those were auspicious occasions as I reflect on them now. My memory of them was triggered recently by an incident I read in an autobiography. The author is describing his maiden sermon as a sixteen year old to a rural Southern Baptist congregation in Mississippi on Youth Sunday. "It was, in many ways," he wrote, "heretical and modernistic for East Fork. But on that occasion I could have denounced Christianity as a capitalist myth cunningly designed to keep the masses under control, and our youth choir could have sung Ukranian folk songs, and our Sunday School Superintendent could have lectured on 'The Origin of the Species', and all the people would have said, 'Amen'. Never had they been so proud of us." (Will Campbell, Brother to a Dragonfly, p.77).

As I recall it now, that is not unlike what happened on those summer Sundays. My father was almost embarassingly proud. And my sermons were the distilled essence of all the wisdom of Western civilization from Aristotle to Freud to Niebuhr. On one of those Sundays, however, I learned one of the most important things I have ever learned about being a minister, or a Christian, or a person, for that matter. After the service - my father and I sat in the living room: he paid me the customary compliments and told me, again, how proud he was. And then he said, very gently, "You told them this morning what Karl Barth and Paul Tillich believe. Next time, why not tell them what you believe? That's what they're interested in."

The simple truth is that much religion, particularly middle class American religion, is second hand. One of the reasons is that theological education itself directs people away from the personal and experiential and directs them toward the impersonal and intellectual. Generations of preachers have been taught to avoid the personal pronoun "I" at all costs: to avoid personal references: never to risk directing a congregation's attention to oneself. Part of the reason is that many of us have had a smattering of experience with religion that relies almost exclusively on personal testimony. The trouble with lifting up and celebrating personal experience is that there is no way to submit it to any criteria of integrity. We are uncomfortable with the subjectivity of a religion that says, in effect, "because I felt it, it is ture."

John Biersdorf wrote recently, "There is nothing that seems to worry some Christians more than when someone claims the authenticity of one's own experience. It is as though, if one trusted people on their own, they probably would do awful things." (The Christian Ministry, 3/78, p.5).

And yet one of the startling new realities of our day is an open hunger for honest religious experience. Young people who barely endured a dozen years of Sunday School suddenly turn up in the Jesus Movement, or as Moonies, or disciples of Hari Krishna. Staid Episcopalians show up in the Charismatic gatherings and somber Presbyterians who never spoke in Church in anything but a whisper, turn to the emotional excesses of the media evangelist.

Out of it all is coming something new and intriguing: a recovery of personal testimony, personal experience as the location of religious truth. It is described academically by the phrase "Theology as Story". And it means simply that the formative religious events for most of us were personal, emotional, intimate: that

what we believe cannot be separated from our lives. It suggests that our growth in faith involves stretching our minds, but also listening to our own experience -: reading what others have said, but also listening to our own voices.

And so to the text. Like most of the Old Testament it is someone's story, a testimony about a time when a person met God. Samuel's mother, Hannah, in gratitude for his birth, had taken her young son to Eli, the priest, to be dedicated to the Lord and to serve in the Temple. It was there, in the Temple, that the young Samuel one night heard the voice of God calling him.

Now there are some interesting things about this story. First, no one seems to recognize the voice of God. Samuel didn't: when he heard the voice he went to Eli. And Eli - Eli acted like we might under the circumstances. If one of my children came to me in the middle of the night and said a voice had spoken, I would conclude that he or she had watched too much television that day, or was dreaming. I would do what Eli did: tell him to get a drink of water and go back to sleep. Fortunately, after the phenomenon occurred a second time Eli suggested that Samuel might answer. But the point is that the person telling this story wants us to understand that it wasn't very clear; that it took three times for God to get through to Samuel; that Samuel mistook the voice of God for the voice of someone else.

In fact, before the author tells the story he sets the scene with what is perhaps the most significant statement in the text: "And the word of the Lord was rare in those days: there was no frequent vision." We don't know whether that's a description of God, or "those days". It's not clear whether the author means God wasn't talking or the people weren't listening. Whatever the intent, the writer wants us to understand that people weren't hearing God. I am suggesting that it was because they weren't listening.

I am suggesting, further, that our religion is not as personal, experiential, and real, because we may have forgotten the discipline of listening. I am suggesting that part of what we must recover is the ability to hear our own voices.

There is a lot about us as people, however, that makes what I just said a very ambitious proposition. In fact, there is a lot about us that moves in the opposite direction altogether. Fundamental to the very title of this sermon is time and space and an inclination to listen. The life we live does not permit any of that very easily.

Time to listen? We're too busy living. Busyness is our dearest status symbol. A Puritan legacy, perhaps, but we clearly identify goodness and success with being busy. Ministers, particularly, are guilty. We don't punch a time clock, or sell a product, or manufacture a machine and we act sometimes as if the justification for our being alive depends on keeping busy. At gatherings of clergy, being busy often appears to have become synonymous with being faithful. And you, to your discredit, not only allow us to get away with it, but actually encourage it. You tell us, "I wanted to see you, but you're so busy." One of my strongest reactions to life as a minister in Scotland this summer was precisely here. The role of minister as administrator and program director simply doesn't exist there. There was no office, no secretary, no dictaphone, and very few committee meetings. The result was a lot of empty time - which made me very uncomfortable. We know, intellectually, that the good life is a counterpoint between busy activity and solitude: we know, intellectually, that we need quiet times, to think and meditate and get in touch with ourselves and pray. But very few of us are strong enough to give ourselves the permission to use time in that way.

Time to listen - and space - a quiet place. We are surrounded on all sides by noise: the noise of traffic, and jet planes, and sirens and music. We wake to it, and go to sleep to it, and fill our automobiles with it and turn the television on automatically in our empty house because we are so unaccustomed to the quiet. But some lonely place, some quiet space, is the only way your own voices can penetrate the incessant noise of our culture.

Time and space and the inclination. Dutch Theologian Henri Nouwen observes that when he first came to this country he was astounded by the absence of privacy, and a false sense of honesty that requires Americans to reveal all. He writes: "The American Way of life tends to be suspicious toward closedness. When I came to this country I was struck by the opendoor life style. In schools, institutes and office buildings everyone worked with open doors. It seemed as if everyone was saying to me, 'Do not hesitate to walk in and interrupt at any time,' and most conversations had the same open quality - giving me the impression that people had no secrets and were ready for any question ranging from their financial status to their sex life." (Reaching Out, p.21).

An accurate observation, I would suggest. In the name of communication, sometimes we talk too much. Intending to be open with one another we leave no private space unexposed. And after a while it seems that there is nothing to us that is not known to others, no voices we have not already revealed to others.

Our culture is not helpful. But beneath it all we don't listen to our own voices because we have been convinced that they have nothing to say. It's a crisis of self-esteem once again. We don't listen to ourselves - because we don't think it's worth our time. And the tragedy is that our own voices, our innermost selves, our most personal experiences, are precisely the place where God addresses us.

I have always felt that one of the places God speaks to us most clearly is in the arena of human creativity. We know that creativity always involves loneliness, the willingness to be quiet and listen, the intentional shutting out of the world and hearing what is going on in one's self.

Dag Hammarskjold wrote in his diary: "The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is sounding outside." (Markings,p.13).

Being an honest and authentic person depends on knowing yourself, and trusting yourself and listening to yourself. I suggested last week that we can't love God or other people until we come to terms with ourselves: that we can't give anything until we believe that we have something to give. Relationships become suffocating and clinging and oppressive unless we know and value our own autonomy. Henry David Thoreau, who knew something about the subject wrote: "When our life ceases to be inward and private, conversation degenerates into mere gossip. We rarely meet a man who can tell us any news he has not read in a newspaper, or been told by his neighbor... In proportion as our inward life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the post office. You may depend on it, that the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while." (Walden and Other Writings, p. 723-4: in Nouwen, p.18).

It is healthier to know oneself. It is potentially creative to listen to one's own voices. We will be better conversationalists, better company, better husbands, wives and friends if our script is first hand and our material experiential. But my concern is not essentially with self-improvement. It is with our experience of God. My assumption is that God does address us - but that we don't hear very well: that God speaks to that deep, inner self we have been ignoring.

My concern is that active, on-the-go Christians slow down a bit, realizing that their very busyness is one of the reasons their religious experience is so shallow.

My concern is that we look for and listen for God carefully: intentionally, with discipline and patience.

My concern is that we acknowledge the importance of our own personal story: that we take the time to remember and locate and think about those events which caused us to believe - to respond to Jesus Christ. There is an element of loneliness in the act of believing in God. We can read what the theologians have said: we can check our inclinations with friends: but,ultimately, authentic faith means standing alone and saying - "This I believe". My concern is that we recover, in that process, the truth that we have learned in our own lives: that we put a high premium on those personal experiences that have told us we are not alone: there is a God who loves us and cares about us.

In his opening sermon at the recent Lambeth Conference, Archbishop of Canterbury Donald Coggan told the Anglican Bishops: "We have stopped listening to God: our spiritual life has died on us, though we keep up appearances and go through the motions. We noisy, comfortable Westerners have much to learn from our Eastern brothers materially poorer and often spiritually richer."

My concern is that we learn from the Samuel story that God addresses us quietly: that He weaves His word to us into the fabric of our lives in ways we may not ever be able to describe or document or prove. It doesn't matter that you have not been knocked down by lightning, nor that God has not addressed you as clearly as He always seems to speak when Hollywood tells the story. He addresses us with subtlety and gentleness in the solitude of our personhood. He comes in love shared between you and your dearest: He comes in the miracle of the birth of your child: He comes as you stand alone in the valley of the shadow of death: He comes in moments of tearful happiness and profound joy. He speaks quietly, in a voice you may not recognize at first.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning teaches me that lesson every October. There are two fire bushes in front of our house which turn a brief bright red at this time of year. And every time I see it I look up her poem and carry it around with me for a few days:

"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God
And only he who sees takes off his shoes--
The rest sit round it and pick blackberries."

One time, on a hill outside Jerusalem, a man was crucified. A noisy crowd of people stood around His cross, jeering, shouting. And His followers thought that God had never been more silent, more absent. But later they came to the conclusion that the event was the clearest word God had ever spoken: that for those who could hear, it began more and more to sound like a symphony of love and victory and beauty.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news that God has come and has spoken: and that He continues to come and to speak: and that He does address us - quietly: and that to hear we must listen very carefully: and that the place He comes may be in the quiet, aloneness of your personhood: and that His word to you may be in the sound of your own voices. Amen.

Father, we confess that we have not heard because we have not listened. Bless our lives with a little solitude: help us to hear as you speak: give us courage to answer, to rise up and follow. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.